

The Semantics of the English *Have a* Construction

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This paper discusses the English *have a* construction, such as *have a walk* and *have a look*. Although this construction is considered to express essentially the same meaning as the construction with the corresponding simple verb such as *walk* and *look* (see Quirk *et al.* 1985, Swan 2005), some researchers such as Wierzbicka (1988) and Dixon (2005) observe that it has specific meanings and cannot be used for certain types of events. In this paper, I argue that the construction expresses the meaning of “*try*”, and that this semantic property accounts for the acceptability of telic events in the construction, which are considered unacceptable by Wierzbicka (1988) and Dixon (2005).

Wierzbicka and Dixon argue that the *have a* construction is only compatible with activities that can be done for some time or are repeatable. They say that telic activities such as those given in (1b)-(3b) are unacceptable.

- (1) a. John **had a walk in** the park.
- b. *John **had a walk to** the post office to post a letter.
- (2) a. Let’s **have a sing**.
- b. *Let’s **have a sing of the song**.
- (3) a. **have a swim in** the river
- b. ***have a swim across** the river

However, their analysis is falsified by the following actual examples.

- (4) a. I’ll **have a walk to** the buffet car and have a drink. My legs have seized up from sitting.
- b. Just **had a swim across** the bay at Bondi in my brand new Alpha Orca wetsuit! I can’t believe how good these things are.
- c. Maybe, I’ll **have a watch of this film**. [*said when switching channels to try and find a good film on television*]

(4a-c) are perfectly acceptable despite the fact that they involve telic phrases. In (4a), the speaker is not really determined to do the action, but just tries to ease the pain in his legs by doing so. In (4b), the speaker has tried out his new wetsuit by swimming across the bay. (4c) is intended to mean that the speaker is trying out the film to see if it is worth watching. In short, (4a-c) express the speaker’s intention to try, especially when (s)he is not really serious about it and just does it casually.

To explain the acceptability of (4a-c), I propose the following: (i) the core meaning of the construction is “*do it a bit*”, and (ii) the construction is divided into two types depending on its additional implications:

- (5) The action is done
 - a. for relief or pleasure
 - b. to try something

(5a) has also been claimed by Wierzbicka and Dixon (e.g. *have a walk/lie-down/rest*),

whereas (5b), the proposal of this paper, has three subtypes:

- (6) a. try to find out
- b. try it out
- c. have a try at

The following examples are instantiations of (6a):

- (7) a. I asked the doctor to **have a look at** my cut.
- b. Do you **have a feel of** your fruit before buying?
- c. Let me **have a think about** it before I decide.

Have a look at means “look at something with attention” or “examine” (that is, more than what just *look* means). *Have a feel of* also means “*examine by touch*”. *Have a think about* is only used for a problem or question to be solved. Namely, these phrases imply the meaning of “*try to find out something*”, such as a condition or solution.

As for (6b), observe the following examples:

- (8) a. I **had a play with** the new computer game.
- b. Let me **have a carry of** that new suit case you designed.

(8a,b) indicate that the speakers tried or wish to try out the new things to see what they are like. This is another type of “*try*”.

(6c) represents an idiomatic expression of “*try casually*”. There are quite a few of the expression. (9a,b) illustrate the two of them.

- (9) a. I thought I’d **have a bash** at fixing the washing machine tonight.
- b. I want to **have a go at** finishing my essay tonight.

In sum, the *have a* construction expresses the meanings of “*do it a bit*” and “*try*”, and thus the construction is compatible with the description of “*try a bit*”. This property accounts for the acceptability of (4a-c). On the other hand, examples (1b), (2b) and (3b) are judged unacceptable because the context does not tell us whether or not the situation involves any intention to try.

<References>

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